



## ODL COMMUNIQUÉ 37, 3 NOVEMBER 2010

### IN THIS ISSUE:

- 1 *The juggler's brain – or how (not) to design for a networked learning experience*
- 2 *The renaissance of the human voice – radio versus podcasts*
- 3 *And what a celebration it was....*
- 4 *ODL Task team 6 – the latest*
- 5 *A vision for ODL... another view*
- 6 *The second part of my International Fellowship at the Open University*
- 7 *ODL Repository and blog*

### 1 THE JUGGLER'S BRAIN – OR HOW (NOT) TO DESIGN FOR A NETWORKED LEARNING EXPERIENCE

For this week's communiqué, I am returning to the book by Carr (2010) "The shallows. How the internet is changing the way we think, read and remember", especially to Carr's discussion of the impact of reading and studying online...

There is a strong drive to move Unisa into the 21<sup>st</sup> century with a commitment to design all teaching and learning primarily for e-learning, but allowing for a range of delivery options to students. These delivery options will entail having everything provided in print, to having the whole learning experience online. Not only will this allow for differentiated pricing and student support structures, but also for optimising the affordances of a range of technologies *without excluding students*. While Unisa contemplates the implications of such a decision, it must also be taken into account the current initiatives to increase our students' access to a range of affordable technologies and data packages. But as warned in a previous edition of an ODL Communiqué, *good technologies do not make bad teaching better...*

So how do we combine good teaching with good technologies? How do we design for good teaching in a networked world? What should we take into account? What are the possibilities? What are the dangers?



Carr (2010) is not negative about the role of the internet in modern-day society, on the contrary. Carr (2010) takes a very sober and pragmatic approach to the impact of the internet on the human brain, and on broader society. Carr (2010:115) compares being online like having and developing a juggler's brain – the excitement of having access to multiple sources of information on the click of a button, but accompanied by the terror of becoming lost and overwhelmed. He states that dozens of studies “by psychologists, neurobiologists, educators, and Web designers point to the same conclusion: when we go online, we enter an environment that promotes cursory reading, hurried and distracted thinking, and superficial learning. It's possible to think deeply while surfing the Net, just as it's possible to think shallowly while reading a book, *but that's not the type of thinking the technology encourages and rewards*” (Carr 2010:115-116; emphasis added). Except for the shallowness the web encourages, not being on the web, also encourages “a terrific anxiety about being out of the loop. ... the Net seizes our attention only to scatter it” (Carr 2010:118). There is enough research which provides compelling evidence that using the Net alters the way we think (not only the ‘what’ but more importantly the ‘how’...). Carr (2010:121) shares the findings of an experiment that found that “the brain activity of [the] experienced Googlers was much broader than that of the novices”. The novices (to the Internet) in the experiment rewire their brains after just five hours of computer and Internet exposure. The good news is that using the Internet may keep our brains sharp (2010:122), the bad news is that using the Internet sacrifices our ability for deep reading...

“The need to evaluate links and make related navigational choices, while also processing a multiplicity of fleeting sensory stimuli, requires constant mental coordination and decision making, distracting the brain from the work of interpreting text or other information” (Carr 2010:122). Instead of reading with the intention to understand and make judgments, we respond to one hyperlink after the other – becoming obsessed to get to the “end” – *while knowing that there is no end*. More is not necessarily better (Carr 2010:123). “We're able to transfer only a small portion of the information to long-term memory, and what we do transfer is a jumble of drops from different faucets, not a continuous coherent stream from one source” (Carr 2010:125). Reading online and following hyperlinks result in us reaching the limits of our short-term memory in a much shorter period of time and we then have difficulty to “distinguish relevant information from irrelevant information, signal from noise. *We become mindless consumers of data*” (Carr 2010:125; emphasis added).

Carr (2010:126) explores how educators, at first, thought how introducing hyperlinks would result in a “boon to learning”. “Freed from the lockstep reading demanded by printed pages, readers would make all sorts of new intellectual connections among diverse texts” (Carr 2010:126). Hyperlinks were seen as a victory over the “patriarchal authority of the author” and the shift in power away from the author to the readers (Carr 2010:126). It was then thought that as soon as readers developed “hypertext literacy” that deeper reading and learning would (again) become possible, but this did not happen... Carr (2010:127) writes that “*research continues to show that people who read linear text comprehend more, remember more, and learn more than those who read text peppered with links*” (emphasis added).

Not only does reading a text full of hyperlinks take longer, but readers report “more confusion and uncertainty about what they had read” (Carr 2010:127). This then brings Carr (2010:128) to state that the attention of readers are “directed to the machinery of the hypertext and its functions rather than to the experience offered by the story”. Links therefore “got in the way of learning” and the more hyperlinks in the text, the less learning... (Carr 2010:128).

*Before you judge the research, wait a moment, there is more...*

The research on the effect of hyperlinks on reading and learning also applies to the inclusion of multimedia or hypermedia (images, sounds and moving pictures) into the learning experience. Carr (2010:129) contests the notion that more is better. He quotes several studies which indicate that students exposed to multimedia learning experiences remember *fewer facts* than those exposed to ‘ordinary’ learning experiences based on a linear reading of a text. Carr (2010:131) relates this to the possibility that the more the stimulation, the greater the possibility that the stimulation will exceed the “viewers’ attentional capacity”. Carr (2010:131) does agree that there is also evidence that carefully designed (sic) learning combining audio, sound and text *does enhance learning*. But then he moots the following: “The Internet, however, wasn’t built by educators to optimise learning. It presents information not in a carefully balanced way but as a concentration-fragmenting mishmash. The Net is, by design, an interruption system, a machine geared for dividing attention” (Carr 2010:131).

When reading and learning on the Net, the frequent switching between sites is costing us in our diminishing ability to pay attention and reflect, a cost that we often lose sight of (Carr 2010:133). As we become used to the constant stream of alerts, we “*want* to be interrupted, because each interruption brings us a valuable piece of information” (Carr 2010:133), resulting in an overvaluing of “what happens to us *right now*” (Chabris quoted by Carr 2010:134). Carr (2010:138) then seems to change his focus by stating that a new type of reading behaviour is emerging, and that the ability to skim text is “as important as the ability to read deeply. What is different, and troubling, is that skimming is becoming our dominant mode of reading” (Carr 2010:138). Humankind is changing from “being cultivators of personal knowledge to being hunters and gatherers in the electronic data forest” (Carr 2010:138).

Let us reflect for a moment on the issues Carr (2010) is mooting. At first I was disturbed by the evidence that reading and studying online may result in shallowness and lack of memory. It is however important that one should also consider the following before judging...

The basic assumption of teaching and learning in the age B.G. (Before Google) was because you did not always have your sources *with you*, you therefore had to remember the most important facts. But in an age when everything you need to remember can be Googled with the click of a button, *why would we still want to test memory?*

Should we not rather test the ability of our students to find AND judge the available information? A small voice in my head warns of the possibility of the Internet melting down with the resultant loss of masses of information and know-how. In the light of such a possibility, the small voice says, we should not rely too much on the Net. This is reminiscent of the practice of some people still hoard their life savings under their beds just in case the banks' systems go down, just to find that the rats got there first...

I therefore don't think I agree with the evaluation Carr (2010) offers. Yes, reading and learning online will most probably result in us not having the 'same' memory abilities than those who read and learn from text books, in the age B.G... But the more important question is whether the comparison (and assessment) that Carr (2010) refers to is valid? Yes, if memory is important, the evidence may be valid. But in a networked world, how important is memory? I do not discount the importance of some memorisation, but to judge the Internet just on its effect on memory, seems suspicious and possibly imperfect.

Despite some doubt regarding Carr's (2010) assessment, I do think he provides us many important pointers to take into consideration when developing curricula and designing pedagogies, such as

- How do we prepare students for a networked age where most (if not all) information is available online? How do we prepare them to find information and to evaluate the appropriateness of information? *Or is it more important for us to have students regurgitating facts?*
- How do we prepare students *to use* the available information? It is one thing to find and evaluate information, but do we prepare students to apply information to solve current real-world issues and challenges?
- In many conversations regarding teaching and learning at Unisa in an increasingly networked world, the discussion inevitably turns to those students who don't have access. Can Unisa afford to NOT prepare students for a world where access will be presumed a given? Ms Klarissa Engelbrecht stated on Friday during the "Celebration of innovation of teaching and learning at Unisa" that when students are employed they will on their first day have access to networks, systems, electronic correspondence and a wealth of electronic documentation. *Will they be ready?*
- Which brings me to the question: Are our lecturers ready to teach in a networked world where there are better (and often free...) materials online than those lecturers painstakingly (and often grudgingly) prepare? Do we still assess our students' capabilities as if we live B.G? Do we know how to design learning where your role of lecturer may change from being the only (and often quoted) expert to being a *facilitator* of learning, a *concierge* or caretaker of sources and a *curator* of networks?
- Do we prepare our students for a world in which they will be increasingly be jugglers of hyperlinks and multiple sources?

Carr (2010:142) ends his chapter on “The juggler’s brain” with a somewhat cynical remark that multitasking online teaches us to “pay attention to crap” which may result in the death of our intellectual lives.

While the danger is there that the Internet and teaching and learning online will be nothing more than the “shallows”, I am not so convinced that all our curricula and assessment actually resembles deep learning in the service of humankind. I would rather have a juggler’s brain than the brain required of many of our students graduating from this institution...

## 2 THE RENAISSANCE OF THE HUMAN VOICE – RADIO VERSUS PODCASTS

At the Senate meeting of last week, 27 October, the issue of having radio broadcasts was again mentioned as a possible solution for providing academic support to our students. Radio broadcasts has always been an integral part of many distance education outreaches. The Open University was established with as core to its charter its relationship with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Other examples of radio broadcasts as part of distance education projects include distance education institutions in Mexico, Zambia, Botswana, Mauritius, Thailand, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal, to mention but a few.

It would be so easy to state that because radio broadcasts have always been part and parcel of reaching out to the unreached, that Unisa should invest the resources into establishing a Unisa radio station. *Before we do that*, however, let us consider a number of pointers. International ODL research does allude to a “renaissance of the human voice”. A recent visit to the University of Leicester illustrated the huge impact low cost audio podcasts can have in a well-designed learning experience. *The question is whether radio is the most appropriate option to optimise this renaissance of the human voice?*

A radio broadcast requires that the broadcast takes place at a time when students have the time to listen to these broadcasts. Considering the age profile and life-roles of our students, will radio broadcasts really reach the unreached? If they have to choose between their favorite television shows, or family responsibilities, will they choose to listen to a broadcast? A radio broadcast therefore assumes that the broadcast takes place at a time when students have the time (and need) to listen. And this assumption is seriously suspect. Is there not a way in which Unisa can make *chunk-size recordings* available to students to listen to *when they have the time and the need, wherever they are*? If Unisa optimises the affordances of audio podcasts which can be posted on myUnisa, sent to students on a Flash drive, burned onto CDs, downloaded onto their mobiles and iPods, would this not reach more students? Making audio podcasts is furthermore much cheaper than broadcasting. Lecturers can make these podcasts in the comfort of their offices and/or homes when *they* have the time to do so. Lecturers can make audio podcasts before the academic year and either release all the podcasts simultaneously or release the podcasts on myUnisa as the learning journey progresses. International research indicates that these broadcasts do not have to be of a SABC or BBC quality.



There is evidence that “quick and dirty” recordings have a huge impact on students’ learning because these “quick and dirty” recordings can be made at critical points of a student’s journey. Should lecturers still want to make longer and more professional recordings, they can always utilise the services of Unisa’s Department of Photography, Sound and Video.

And then there is the matter of Unisa’s more than 3 000 modules. How will we choose which modules will have a broadcast when? If we aim to broadcast between 19:00 and 23:00 at night, this will give us 4 hours of broadcasts. If we broadcast only during the week, this will give us 20 hours’ per week. If all lecturers get an opportunity to have one hour per semester, this will result that we will need at least 3 000 hours over a 16 week semester.

In the light of new advances in technology, our student profile, the number of modules at Unisa and cost-effective use of resources, institutionalising audio podcasts is a much more effective way to optimise and celebrate the potential of the human voice. Me thinks.

### 3 AND WHAT A CELEBRATION IT WAS....

On Friday 29 October a large group of Unisa staff celebrated examples of innovation in teaching and learning at Unisa. And what a celebration it was! Prof Rita Maré, Vice Principal: Academic and Research opened the event and celebrated the ODL journey at Unisa. We have indeed come a long way!

The presentations were diverse, and just when one thought that a presentation was the ultimate, the next presentation provided even more surprises! The first presenter, **Ms Klarissa Engelbrecht** really provoked the audience by sharing her view that Unisa should not always succumb to the notion of the “lowest common denominator” such as the notion that our students do not have access to technologies and *therefore we cannot expect of them to get access*.

She mooted the notion that because we expect so little of students, they perform accordingly! *If we raise our expectations, they may actually live up to it...* Klarissa is really breaking new ground with the appointment of Distance Learning Aides (DLAs) who fulfil the role of an E-Mentor to her 20 000 students. **Mr Felix Fushai** (Science Foundation Project Coordinator) and **Ms Michelle van Wyk** (Geography) shared with us the amazing work they are doing in the Science Foundation Programme. They were brutally honest regarding the low participation rates, but also provided some interesting pointers regarding the move towards E-Tutors in future. The systems, procedures and processes they had to design from scratch were really impressive. **Ms Annelien van Rooyen** stunned the audience with her research on using Mxit in the teaching of second year Accounting. Not only do the students appreciate her commitment to support them and answer their queries *after hours* using a very affordable technology, the students also found it “cool”!



Next of the programme was the duo of **Mr Bernard Serfontein** and **Mr Willie le Roux** who shared their development of a “virtual tutor” in the teaching of Micro-economics. The way they integrated video, text, the Internet and their study materials was absolutely amazing. And just before the audience thought that using technologies was the answer to innovation in teaching and learning, **Mr Rudi Pretorius** (Geography) shared the challenges and opportunities in using “ordinary” well-designed portfolios in the teaching of Geography of Tourism. Wonderful work Rudi! Using audio podcasts in the teaching of Taxation was the focus of the presentation by another committed and passionate lecturer, **Ms Kerry de Hart**. She shared her personal journey in getting used to her own voice, but also shared the responses from her students regarding her use of podcasts. Kerry shared evidence that the human voice can indeed make a huge difference to the learning experiences of students when it provides guidance when they need it. Listening to **Mr Denzil Chetty** (Religious Studies) was as if one is pulled into many directions at the same time. I had the intense feeling of being overwhelmed and under-experienced (and being an old dog scared to learn new tricks) when I listened to his overview of a number of technologies and tools that excites him as an educator and which makes students’ learning more pleasurable and exciting. The last presentation of the morning was by **Ms Dalize van Heerden** (Computing) who shared her use of blogging in the teaching of Programming. Dalize is one of the early adopters of *myUnisa* and she is really using the virtual learning environment to the full of its potential. Well done Dalize!

**Prof Pam Ryan** (Executive Director in the office of the Pro Vice Chancellor) responded by applauding the efforts of the lecturers but also challenging them and the rest of the Unisa community to take teaching and learning at Unisa to the next level. Her words of encouragement were a fitting closure to a wonderful event.



*From left to right: Felix Fushai, Denzil Chetty, Rudi Pretorius, Kerry de Hart, Bernard Serfontein, Dalize van Heerden, Michelle van Wyk, Annelien van Rooyen, Pam Ryan, Willie le Roux and Klarissa Engelbrecht*

This event was the first of a number of celebrations of innovation of teaching and learning at Unisa. The next celebration will be towards the middle of the first semester in 2011. Watch this space! If you want to share your innovation in teaching and learning with the wider Unisa community or you know of someone being innovative, please send your/his/her name to me? It will be a great pleasure to compile another set of presentations for the next celebration in 2011! You can e-mail me the details at [prinsp@unisa.ac.za](mailto:prinsp@unisa.ac.za).

#### **4 ODL TASK TEAM 6 – THE LATEST**

The smaller working group of ODL Task Team 6 (Student success and retention) met on 26 October and had a very productive meeting. The main focus was a detailed engagement with the recommendations of the Task Team 4 in the document “Implementation of the conceptual framework for student support at Unisa” approved at the Senate meeting of 27 October 2010. The document represents the point of departure for the finalisation of the Task Team 6 framework document. Ultimately, both of these frameworks will be carefully integrated. A draft framework will be discussed with the full ODL Task team 6 on 8 November after which the document will be finalised and submitted to the last STLSC meeting of this year on 15 November.

We wish ODL Task Team 6 all of the best!

#### **5 A VISION FOR ODL... ANOTHER VIEW**

A colleague of mine, Ms Alice Goodwin-Davey (DCLD) responded to my vision for ODL which I shared in last week’s ODL Communiqué and she shared her own vision for ODL at Unisa. I share her vision with her permission to further stimulate debate and provoke some new thoughts.

She wrote that she liked my vision of ODL at Unisa but that she would go even further, and she suggested the following characteristics of ODL at Unisa in 2015...

- a. Appropriately open in terms of registration and admission deadlines, registration dates, exam on demand, etc [see OU Netherlands]
- b. An even larger international student body, especially students from the rest of Africa, making up part of the total students
- c. More, more, more technologies available such as
  - Cheap internet-provided laptops for students, provided upon registration as part of 1<sup>st</sup> year study package with free internet service, pre-loaded with open source word processing, database, spreadsheet, presentation software [Open Office] and library software [end Note, etc] and other software as needed for their specific modules
  - Cheap eReaders /eBooks for all study materials, including prescribed textbooks, study guides, tutorial letters, recommended articles, etc pre-loaded from Despatch & Production



- Off-line client for *myUnisa* so that students would have access to static online content and only have to 'go online' to do interactive work [add to discussion forums, post emails queries, do online activities, etc] – thus keeping online time at a minimum
  - Second Life-type communities online where groups can interact using audio, text, video, etc – for staff and for postgraduate students – to create and innovate
  - Mxit-type programs for cheap student support via mobile phones – multi-lingual dictionaries, library links, article downloads, *myUnisa* link, etc, etc
- c. Ability to do assessments [formal and non-formal self assessments] using mobile phones, assessment on demand with randomization and immediate feedback to practice again and again
- d. All Unisa buildings are Wi-Fi enabled so that students and academics have access to stable, reliable internet access from any place on any campus, including regional centres and offices all around the country
- e. All training venues [for staff *and* students] are Wi-Fi enabled to allow for live demonstrations of how things work.

She writes “The funny thing is – none of my additions above are ‘future’ – they are ‘normal’ scenarios for other universities around the world, and around this country. Why is it, then, SO DIFFICULT for Unisa to catch up?!”

## **6 THE SECOND PART OF MY INTERNATIONAL FELLOWSHIP AT THE OPEN UNIVERSITY**

On Saturday 6 November I will be leaving to complete the second phase of my International Fellowship at the Open University. I have been awarded the Fellowship to do collaborative research with two of my colleagues at the OU, namely Dr Sharon Slade and Ms Fenella Galpin, both stationed at the regional office of the OU in Oxford. The focus of the research is to explore the notion, content and implications of a ‘global’ or internationalised curriculum in the context of the OU, particularly with regard to their MBA. During my visit to the OU during July this year we finalised our research outline and questionnaire which was sent to students, tutors, academics and employers to investigate these respective groups’ perceptions of what an international MBA should offer. During this visit we will analyse the data and have follow-up focus-group interviews with representative samples of the four groups. We hope to complete these follow-up interviews and analysis of all the data before I return to Unisa early in December.

During my visit I will also meet with other staff of the OU regarding their processes to re-imagine student support at the OU and also discuss their regional model. The OU also funds me to do a four week online course on “internationalising the curriculum” offered by Oxford Brookes University in Oxford. Bored, I will not be...

This is an immense privilege and I really would like to thank Prof Maré, Vice Principal: Academic and Research for the opportunity. I hope to share my experiences with the Unisa community during my stay in Oxford and I will also ensure that the ODL project keeps its momentum. The year 2011 will be a crucial year in the implementation of ODL – and may we receive wisdom and courage to do what is necessary to realise ODL.

## **7 ODL REPOSITORY AND BLOG**

All the ODL task team reports, the overview of the recommendations of the STLSC and other ODL documents are available on the Unisa Library’s Institutional Repository at <http://uir.unisa.ac.za/dspace/handle/10500/3072> (accessed 2 November 2010). The repository is updated on a regular basis and if you register on the repository, you will get notifications of any new uploads.

You are also most welcome to comment on this (and previous) ODL Communiqués on the Unisa Staff website. On the right hand side of the Unisa Staff website, you will see a section titled “Important links” under which you must then click on “Blogs”. On the blog page, you will notice two links namely “E-connect” and “Open Distance Learning”. If you follow the latter you will be able to read and comment on the ODL Communiqués.

*Drafted by Dr Paul Prinsloo*

ODL Coordinator, Office of the Vice-Principal: Academic & Research, Unisa  
2 November 2010

+27 (0) 12 4293683 (office), +27 (0) 823954113 (mobile), [prinsp@unisa.ac.za](mailto:prinsp@unisa.ac.za)

**Disclaimer:** The opinions expressed in this ODL Communiqué represent my personal viewpoints and do not represent the viewpoint of any other member of the Unisa community.